SAMUEL JOHNSON

Literature, religion and English cultural politics from the Restoration to Romanticism

J. C. D. CLARK

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Samuel Johnson, like much else about the eighteenth century, is further from us than it first appears. The literary idioms of that age, its ideological and political conflicts, and even the terminology in which they were expressed, call for the attention of the historian if their superficial similarities are not to betray us into a false confidence. This book is, in part, an historian's contribution to the study of Johnson's politics and religion,[1] but it has been drawn also to propose a new context for the cultural politics of his age. It is, of course, new only in relation to the research strategies of modern academic disciplines. Literary criticism achieved its autonomy in the English academic arena in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth at a time when projects like the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Oxford History of England* engaged technical scholarship with a range of profoundly patriotic assumptions. Among the major premises which 'English' as a subject then acquired, and which has not been effectively revised since,[2] has been the self-sufficiency of the vernacular. As far back as we could look (it was assumed) England possessed an autonomous, free-standing, and vigorous vernacular literature: whether rough or polished, plebeian or middle class, provincial and plural or metropolitan and uniform, its autonomy was too seldom questioned. That assumption once secure, it was an easy next step to presume that that vernacular literature gave eloquent if changing expression to English national identities.

It is argued here that that assumption embodies only a part of the truth. The classics existed in close relation to the vernacular, and gave a privileged place to the translation and the imitation within English letters. The

[1] Many other themes in Johnson's ethical and philosophical thought deserve attention. For one important study, which does not, however, structure its material with respect to politics, see Nicholas Hudson, *Samuel Johnson and Eighteenth-century Thought* (Oxford, 1988).

[2] For an important example of a reviving attention to the interplay between the vernacular and the classical, see Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993).

dominance of the classical tradition in this period is easily demonstrated from the landmarks of vernacular literature: England's national epic was Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*; her leading military epic was Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*; her most popular play was Addison's *Cato*; her most distinguished satires were Pope's imitations of Horace. Johnson was sceptical of the viability and autonomy of different genres of vernacular literature in various ages before his own,[3] and the cultural politics of England between the Restoration and what is conventionally described as Romanticism, briefly outlined in this book, give grounds for endorsing his caution. Just as Englishmen of that period did not organise their collective identities by reference to a single matrix which can be labelled 'nationalism',[4] so the undoubted emergence of a self-sufficient vernacular was neither early nor inevitable. The episodes of cultural politics by which English literature and consciousness moved from the world of Milton and Cowley to that of the Victorian novelists is one context for the life and posthumous reputation of Johnson.

The processes included under the label 'the rise of the vernacular' were not only, and perhaps not chiefly, the positive affirmations of new ideals; they involved also the failure and the negation of old norms, especially ones to which the young Johnson had committed himself. The wider dimensions of the classics, and the implications of his cultural project in politics and religion, are a central theme of this study. Late humanist classicism, it is suggested, lasted for longer, and was more powerful, than historians or literary scholars have generally allowed; yet this unique historical formation lacks a name which would easily characterise it, and the decline in the twentieth century of knowledge of Latin and Greek has gradually closed off one half of a bilingual, or sometimes two thirds of a trilingual, culture from our appreciation. That culture is here called the Anglo-Latin tradition. It is not a wholly satisfactory term, since Greek, though secondary, was not insignificant; but it seems likely that the term 'neoclassical'[5] is already too replete with meanings from the history of art, in which it signifies a reaction against the Baroque, to identify a cultural formation which clearly included the Baroque and, in its later neo-Grecian phase,

[3] See below, pp. 24–6.

[4] J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 46–62.

[5] For an argument against the prefix 'neo' in the term 'neoclassicism' on the grounds that classicism is always retrospective, see Bertrand Harris Bronson, 'When Was Neoclassicism', in Bronson, *Facets of the Enlightenment: Studies in English Literature and Its Contexts* (Berkeley, 1968), pp. 1–25.

even distinguished the Romanticism of the years before the 1830s from the Romanticism of the Victorians.[6]

In so far as the cultural polemics discussed here were an aspect of the conflict between 'ancients' and 'moderns', it is important that that conflict was not decided during the 'battle of the books' fought in the last decade of the seventeenth and the first decades of the eighteenth century. That battle, though loud, was inconclusive.[7] The conflict between the cultural systems of which the Anglo-Latin tradition and the vernacular tradition were (not wholly mutually exclusive) facets survived because there were profound religious and political polarities on which they drew. This was Johnson's world, at least until the 1750s. One contemporary tribute to *The Rambler*, reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, hailed its author in exactly this classical idiom: 'May the publick favours crown his merits, and may not the English, under the auspicious reign of GEORGE the Second, neglect a man, who, had he lived in the first century, would have been one of the greatest favourites of AUGUSTUS.'[8] Boswell was forced to add: 'This flattery of the monarch had no effect. It is too well known, that the second George never was an Augustus to learning or genius.'[9]

The young Samuel Johnson's ambition was to become a skilled and acknowledged exponent of the tradition of classical humanism.[10] But this was not merely a personal choice or a lonely elective affinity: Johnson chose the broad high road trod by the most able men of letters in England between the Restoration and the 1740s or 1750s. Nor was it merely a literary choice: the Anglo-Latin tradition was part of a wider political, social and cultural project both in England and Scotland. Such traditions were not disembodied: they reveal their purposes, and interconnections, in individual lives. For Johnson's cultural project to be understood in more than the two dimensions of the printed page, his life is here set in the context created by men whom he recognised as embarked in the same cause. In particular, William King at Oxford and Thomas Ruddiman at Edinburgh, both Latinists, cultural catalysts and social activists, help to define a phase of classical learning and its purposes in Britain. An analogy is not an identity: these men were not copies of each other. Ruddiman was a grammarian, editor, publisher and author of polemical historical pamphlets; King a neo-Latin poet, critic and satirist. But only the near-extinction

[6] For a defence of the term 'neoclassical', see James William Johnson, *The Formation of English Neo-Classical Thought* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 3 30.

[7] Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 7, places the final and irreparable alterations of political life and historical consciousness 'sometime in the nineteenth century'.

[8] *Gentleman's Magazine* 20 (1750), 465. [9] Boswell, *Life*, vol. 1, p. 209.

[10] For which, see especially Robert DeMaria, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1993), pp. xi-xvi and passim.

of the classics in subsequent generations has obscured their stature, and prevented the analogy from seeming a self-evident one.[11] It may even be that King achieved higher eminence in his province of the republic of letters than Johnson did in his.[12] But King found no Boswell, and the defeat of Ruddiman's political cause in the 1740s cleared the ground with ruthless thoroughness for that idiom of enquiry later termed the Scottish Enlightenment (the idiom of Ferguson, Hume, Kames, Millar, and Smith) in which Ruddiman's scholarship not only had no place, but was to be systematically rejected. Again, an analogous process in England diminished Johnson's achievement after his death.

Scholars of Johnson, both literary critics and historians, confront an intractable evidential problem. The sources for his life before the 1760s are notoriously meagre, so that, as one literary scholar has observed, 'conjecture becomes a necessary tool if we are to make anything of the scant information at our disposal'.[13] The historian, by the use of circumstantial evidence and the construction of contexts, can contribute some rigour of method to this process. After Johnson's pension in 1762 and his emergence as a public figure, the problem is reversed: the evidence becomes copious, but much of it, and that the part hitherto the most used, was filtered through the powerful, retentive but highly individual mind of James Boswell.

To what degree Boswell created rather than neutrally recorded the character and opinions of the man whom he idolised has preoccupied literary critics. Accounts of Johnson by almost all scholars of English literature since the 1950s have largely or wholly adopted the thesis[14] that the proto-Romantic Boswell foisted onto the pragmatic, sceptical, apolitical Johnson a parody of the Tory and Jacobite identities which owed their final nineteenth-century form to the imagination of Sir Walter Scott. The Johnson whom Macaulay denounced, the bigoted and reactionary Tory and Jacobite, was – it is argued – Boswell's and Macaulay's own creation.

[11] Duncan, *Thomas Ruddiman*, pp. 148–9, assumed that Scotland's Latin culture was 'very different' from England's, and that the latter functioned as 'an assured and independent modern culture': this is to overstate the contrast. Similarly, Greenwood's *William King* did not explore Scots analogies.

[12] For an appraisal of the high stature of King's Latin literature see Greenwood, *William King*, pp. 327–61. Greenwood writes of 'the purity of his classical diction ... artistic and technical expertise ... a formal grandeur'; his prose has 'a richness of vocabulary, an amplitude of expression, and a lambent beauty of phrasing which constantly recall the Ciceronian prototype'.

[13] Paul J. Korshin, in W. H. Bond (ed.), *Eighteenth-Century Studies in Honor of Donald F. Hyde* (New York, 1970), p. 42.

[14] Propounded by Donald J. Greene, in a Columbia University doctoral dissertation of 1954 and in Greene, *Politics* (1960), passim. For an important early dissent from this view, see Howard Erskine-Hill, 'The Political Character of Samuel Johnson', in Isobel Grundy (ed.), *Samuel Johnson: New Critical Essays* (London, 1984), pp. 107–36.

The real Johnson, according to this interpretation, belonged naturally in the historical setting powerfully depicted by one of the most influential twentieth-century historians of England, Sir Lewis Namier (1888–1960).

It is, of course, an entirely proper historical exercise to seek to discern and strip away the subsequent layers of interpretation which may have obscured a subject. In this case, however, the exercise has failed because its chosen end point was deeply inappropriate. Namier's picture of eighteenth-century English society as secular and unideological, and English politics as conducted by small factional groups dedicated to the pursuit of material self-interest, has been qualified in many ways by historians since the 1970s, and has now been abandoned as a faithful portrait of Johnson's age. In place of a timeless and functional picture of interest-group politics, we now see a dynamic pattern of ideologically-fraught conflict which drove English politics through successive identifiable stages: the emergence of Whig and Tory parties in the Exclusion Crisis of the 1670s;[15] an alternating two-party struggle in the reigns of William and Anne;[16] a Whig supremacy under George I and George II failing to destroy a proscribed Tory party which formed the backbone of a bitter and unreconciled opposition;[17] the lasting possibility of a second revolution to break the Whig monopoly;[18] the survival of an ideological matrix for resistance which was the reverse of secular and contractarian;[19] the destruction of the old Whig and Tory parties in the factional conflicts of the 1750s;[20] the emergence in the 1760s of a pattern to persist for many decades, of coalition governments, sustained on a non-party basis by monarchical support and confronting a weakly-organised and fragmented opposition; the revival of party in the early nineteenth century and the arrival of party government after 1832, followed by a paradigm shift which changed men's perspectives on much of what had gone before.[21]

[15] Eveline Cruickshanks, 'Religion and Royal Succession – The Rage of Party', in Clyve Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party* (London, 1987), pp. 19–43.

[16] Henry Horwitz, *Parliament, policy and politics in the reign of William III* (Manchester, 1977); Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London, 1967).

[17] Romney Sedgwick (ed.), *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons 1715–1754* (2 vols., London, 1970).

[18] Eveline Cruickshanks, *Political Untouchables: the Tories and the '45* (London, 1979); Bruce Lenman, *The Jacobite Risings in Britain 1689–1746* (London, 1980).

[19] J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: the Politics of Party 1689–1720* (Cambridge, 1977); Bruce Lenman, 'The Scottish Episcopal Clergy and the ideology of Jacobitism' in Eveline Cruickshanks (ed.), *Ideology and Conspiracy: Aspects of Jacobitism 1689–1759* (Edinburgh, 1982); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 1985).

[20] J. C. D. Clark, *The Dynamics of Change: The Crisis of the 1750s and English Party Systems* (Cambridge, 1982).

[21] J. C. D. Clark, 'A General Theory of Party, Opposition and Government, 1688–1832', *Historical Journal* 23 (1980), 295–325.

Johnson's life spans two of those crucial watersheds. Born in 1709, his earliest years were spent in the Indian summer of Toryism: the famous ministry of the four last years of the Queen, Swift's history of which was for long a dangerous and unpublishable book. In 1714 the rules of English public life were profoundly changed, and Johnson's adolescence, early manhood and middle age were passed under that Whig ascendancy which the first two sovereigns of the Hanoverian dynasty rightly regarded as essential to their survival on the throne. Johnson participated fully in the Tories' experience of exclusion and proscription, and did so for a reason which greatly heightened his emotional response to this predicament: for reasons of religious scruple, he was unable to take the oath of allegiance to the new monarch or the oath of abjuration to deny all title in the rival claimant.

The evidence strongly suggests that in this phase of his career Johnson found reasons to acknowledge the legitimacy of the claims of the Stuarts to the throne from which James II, disastrous though Johnson considered him, had been, in Johnson's view, illegally excluded. In the 1750s this political landscape began to change in the aftermath of the final and crushing defeat of Jacobitism in 1746. Johnson's pronouncements on the dynastic question in the 1750s are open to a degree of ambiguity. He evidently acknowledged some title residing in long possession, in widespread support, and in personal virtue. In 1760 the accession of the young George III, untainted by the vices of his Hanoverian forebears, allowed Johnson, as it allowed many former Tories, to make his peace with the regime. Henceforth the terms 'Whig' and 'Tory' lost much of their force in the politics of Westminster and Whitehall.

The terms did not, of course, disappear from the memories of men whose lives spanned the reigns of monarchs before George III, or, to some degree, from political and religious polemic. Controversy over the legal status of the Established Church and its doctrinal integrity in the late 1760s and early 1770s, controversy over the strident political populism of John Wilkes, and controversy over British policy towards America all allowed polemicists in opposition, especially the Dissenting intelligentsia, to seek to keep the old terms alive. Johnson could be, and often was, condemned in language taken from the world before 1760. These terms were, to different degrees, anachronistic in the new reign;[22] yet to record this anachronism is not enough. Johnson's political identity derived from his experience in obscurity in the early decades of the century, not from the years of his fame. The recovery of the ideological and political alignments of early eighteenth-

[22] James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c. 1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1993).

century England in recent scholarship allows us to say with confidence that Johnson was a Tory, a Nonjuror and a Jacobite within the meanings conventionally given to those words in the reign of George II.

Men of letters, like ideologues and practical politicians, did not display a simple, unchanging political identity as the pieces on a chess board display their coloration: the senses in which men drew political inferences from their theological commitments, attempted to express these through political parties, and understood the tactical options presented to them all evolved, and were sometimes in flux. Nevertheless, there was enough stability in those matters over time for Johnson's commitments to be explained in terms of the survival of an early-Hanoverian political nexus until the 1750s and its transformation in the 1760s.[23]

Johnson was a Tory. In the *Dictionary*, he gave 'Tory' as 'One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolical hierarchy of the church of England, opposed to a Whig': this was presumably sufficient not to call for a definition of 'Toryism'. 'Whig', by contrast, was 'The name of a faction', illustrated with a long and unflattering paragraph from Gilbert Burnet, and 'Whiggism', 'The notions of a Whig', illustrated from Swift: 'I could quote passages from fifty pamphlets, wholly made up of *whiggism* and atheism.' Although Johnson's definitions were in line with lexicographical precedent,[24] this is not evidence for unthinking repetition: as will be argued below, Johnson's opinions, like his definitions, show both conscious partisanship and an accurate understanding of the issues of principle which had divided the two parties in the reigns of George I and George II.

Johnson was a Nonjuror. That term is conventionally now restricted to the small group of men who separated from the main body of the Church of England in 1689 or 1714 and thereafter worshipped in separate congregations. Johnson did not join them, and held some of them in low regard; but his own understanding of the term, as will be shown, included within the ranks of Nonjurors that much larger number who refused the oaths and yet continued to worship with the juring Church. The evidence suggests not only that this was Johnson's practice, but also that he paid a high price for this resolute commitment of principle in career opportunities foregone.

Johnson was a Jacobite. This is perhaps the hardest of his three public affirmations to document, and the evidence for it is presented in this book. There is, of course, no evidence that Johnson was in arms during the

[23] For a scholarly explanation of these and other literary themes against this evolving tactical background, see Howard Erskine-Hill, *Poetry and the Realm of Politics: Shakespeare to Dryden* and *Poetry of Opposition and Revolution: Dryden to Wordsworth* (Oxford, forthcoming).

[24] James Sledd and Gwin Kolb, 'Johnson's Definitions of Whig and Tory', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 67 (1952), 882–5.

rebellion of 1745,[25] or at any other time; but this military inactivity in the face of appalling personal risks is easily explicable, and was shared by almost all Englishmen who entertained some sympathy for the exiled dynasty. If only this most extreme test of armed rebellion is admitted as a means of establishing political identity, then few men at any time would satisfy it: such a simple criterion would, of course, entirely fail to register the motivations for assent, the ideological content of allegiance, or the ways in which allegiance changed in the face of tactical opportunity. Evidence on these questions is rehearsed here.

Boswell's unreliability as a witness has suggested itself most strongly to those scholars who accepted as their major premise the essential validity of Sir Lewis Namier's historical vision: it seemed to follow that Boswell's accounts of Johnson's provocative remarks against Whigs and Hanoverians were rhetorically heightened, and his claims that Johnson affirmed an attachment to the exiled house were Romantic fictions. Yet the reinstatement in recent scholarship of an intellectual nexus which embraced Tories, Jacobites and ministerial Whigs, and which shows why minorities of more extreme Whigs stood outside that dynastic idiom, removes the problem: none of Boswell's evidence is, on the surface, incompatible with the new historiography. If some of the passages in his *Life of Johnson* cannot be traced in his intermediate notes, this merely suggests their source in Boswell's remarkable memory rather than in his imagination.

Although Boswell once confided to his journal that he had 'a kind of *liking* for Jacobitism', his views on the dynastic question were undoubtedly Whig: in the same passage he called the Stuarts' title 'very casual and artificial'.[26] On his Highland tour with Johnson,[27] Boswell sided with Lord Kames and, by implication, against Thomas Ruddiman in the technical dispute of those men over the fundamental historical question whether the succession to the throne of Scotland in the middle ages had been strictly hereditary, or defeasible; uninterrupted, or broken.[28] Boswell even cited in his support William Blackstone, the Oxford Tory whose major work outlined the terms of his accommodation with the regime in the reign of

[25] John Buchan encouraged this belief (without evidence) in his novel *Midwinter* (1925). This blurring of fact and fiction, encouraging either Romantic assent or sceptical dismissal, has been a major obstacle to the scholarly reconstruction of the ideological and tactical options as Johnson saw them.

[26] See below, p. 206.

[27] Boswell, *Journal*, p. 237 (30 September 1773); Boswell, *Life*, vol. 5 (*Tour*), p. 272.

[28] Lord Kames, 'Appendix touching the Hereditary and Indefeasible Right of Kings' in Kames, *Essays upon Several Subjects concerning British Antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1747), pp. 192–217, replied to by Thomas Ruddiman, *A Dissertation concerning The Competition for the Crown of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1748).

George III, and William Paley, the archetypal Cambridge Whig.[29] It was Johnson, not Boswell, who was the real Tory; and it was the committed Anglican Johnson who was the Jacobite, not the lapsed Presbyterian Boswell.

Boswell's records of Johnson's considered opinions on the Jacobite question date from the 1760s. By that stage, all serious possibility of a restoration was long past, and Johnson could discuss the question to some degree as an abstract one. But we have no records of his conversation on this point before the 1760s, and our estimate of it can never be other than circumstantial. It would, however, be realistic to infer from the evidence presented here that Johnson's comments as expressed in private conversation with men like Archibald Campbell, William Guthrie, William King, James Edward Oglethorpe, John, Earl of Orrery and Richard Savage were not restrained by any fundamental difference of orientation.

Nevertheless, even if Boswell were wholly disqualified, there would be sufficient evidence to place Johnson's political and religious views against the spectrum of possibilities presented by his age. Some of this evidence is provided by Johnson's first major biographer, Sir John Hawkins, who may have known his subject from 1739 and whose account in all major respects confirms Boswell's. Yet Hawkins was even less open than his competitor to a charge of having a proto-Romantic proclivity to Toryism which led him to father such views on Johnson. On the contrary, he consistently deplored the views of Nonjurors, Jacobites, Tories and even opposition Whigs: the aim of *The Craftsman*, like that of the opposition which supported it, was

> to blow the flame of national discontent, to delude the honest and well-meaning people of this country into a belief that the minister was its greatest enemy, and that his opponents, only, meant its welfare ... That Johnson has adopted these vulgar complaints, his poem [*London*] must witness. I shall not take upon me to demonstrate the fallacy of most of the charges contained in it, nor animadvert on the wickedness of those, who, to effect their own ambitious designs, scruple not to oppose the best endeavours of the person in power ...[30]

Johnson's views, thought Hawkins, were to be either condemned or excused; but his account of them, presented in this book, coincided with Boswell's.[31]

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* was a work of literature, but not necessarily a

[29] Boswell, loc. cit., cited William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (4 vols., Oxford, 1765–9), vol. 1, p. 205, and William Paley, *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (London, 1785), book vi, chapter 3.

[30] Hawkins, *Life*, pp. 60–1.

[31] A full discussion of the evidential problem must await the publication of the complex manuscript draft of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, volume 1 edited by Marshall Waingrow and volumes 2–4 by Bruce Redford (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming).

work of fiction. In one small respect, an epitome of the larger whole, the biographer stood by his veracity. Macaulay was later to condemn Johnson for his personal eccentricities, including his overbearing manner, and to use these as symptoms of his authoritarianism; yet it was not thoughtlessness or artistic contrivance which led Boswell to preface many of Johnson's remarks with 'Why, Sir'; this really was a Johnsonian characteristic, and Boswell's usage was deliberate: 'I have even learnt a more curious expression, which is to resume a subject with "No, sir," though there is no negation in the case.'[32] Boswell only partly understood his subject's politics and his religion, but what he did understand he faithfully reported.

[32] Boswell, *Journal*, p. 292 (11 October 1773).